

## Rightful Recognition of Kurdistan as a Colony and De-colonizing Knowledge Production

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years the field of Kurdish Studies has witnessed several workshops and panels on the theme of “decolonizing,” influenced by such conversations in Postcolonial, Black and Indigenous Studies. Interestingly, many of these attempts in academic venues have not engaged with the question of ongoing colonial status of Kurdistan and how this status impacts knowledge production. This paper aims to propose a clear definition of a relationship of coloniality with a focus on colonial violence in the region of Bakur and explain why such terminology is necessary, intellectually and politically. As it explains the limits of the terminology used in academic knowledge production about state violence and Kurdish resistance, it also discusses contemporary alternatives to these dominant*

*academic frameworks. It is argued that a rightful decolonization of knowledge about Kurdistan and freedom movements in the region can take place when we simultaneously recognize ongoing colonization, and acknowledge that it is ultimately the organized anti-*

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*colonial movements, which can determine definitions of self-determination, as well as the political means to gain and sustain it.*

## **Introduction**

In recent years the field of Kurdish Studies has witnessed several workshops and panels on the theme of “decolonizing,” influenced by such conversations in Postcolonial, Black and Indigenous Studies. Interestingly, many of these attempts in mainstream academic venues have not engaged with the question of ongoing colonial status of Kurdistan and how this status impacts knowledge production.<sup>2</sup> This question is of crucial importance especially because Kurdistan has not gone through a period of de-colonization. While debates of de-colonizing knowledge production in other contexts have followed a period of official geo-political de-colonization, at least in the form of granting an independent state to the majority nation of the colonized lands, the status of Kurdistan under internationally acknowledged boundaries of Turkey, Iran, and Syria, has not changed with the exception of the partial autonomy granted to the Kurdistan Regional Government.

I believe there is a strange silence about the ongoing colonial violence in different regions of Kurdistan despite an increasing discourse about “de-colonizing” Kurdish Studies. And this silence about the material reality of colonialism unburdens the intellectuals of their moral political responsibility to support anti-colonial movements unlike previous anti-colonial struggles.

To clarify the problem at hand, I will use a historical example. Could one imagine a debate among intellectuals about de-colonizing knowledge production about Algeria, without a clear discussion on ending the French colonial rule over Algeria? Could Algerian and French intellectuals write about violence in Algeria without engaging

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<sup>2</sup> The largest of such attempts in mainstream academic venues have been initiated by Mehmet Kurt and Nadjie Al Haj in Spring 2021, a 2-year workshop titled “Decolonizing Kurdish Studies,” funded jointly by Yale and Brown Universities. There have also been alternatives to these mainstream debates, such as the University of Rojava’s Summer School titled “De-colonization in Kurdistan and Beyond,” in 2022. I will engage with these alternatives in the last section.



with anti-colonial movements' demands? I argue that the state of decolonizing Kurdish studies in the present, without an explicit engagement with structural colonial violence and anti-colonial movements remains superficial at its best, if not complicit in the legitimation of the ongoing colonial rules over Kurdistan.

As a start, both the naming of the occupier state and that of the Kurdish entity need to be clarified. Kurdistan is an "international colony," a concept debated at length by various Kurdish anti-colonial movements and intellectuals, and coined in academia by İsmail Beşikçi, whom I engage with in the following. I focus specifically on the literature on the so-called Kurdish "question" in Turkey, which avoids the concept of colonialism. I also look into discussions of the Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) within this literature.

The PKK emerged in the late 1970s along with other anti-colonial movements in Kurdistan, and proved to be one of the most organized and longest-living anti-colonial movements able to build networks throughout the region and beyond. Although other colonizing states and anti-colonial Kurdish movements are equally important and we should be wary of a reproduction of colonial borders in our analyses, I take Turkey-Bakur relationship as an entry point to dive deeply into systematic and structural violence of colonialism. And I look into the discursive formation surrounding the discussions of the PKK, to reveal the limits of liberal academic discourse, as well as the reproduction of colonial processes of criminalization by disengaged researchers.

My first argument is that the relationship between Turkish state and Bakur, needs to be understood as one of colonialism and the Kurdish movements against the Turkish rule need to be understood as anti-colonial struggles against this foundational violence of colonialism. Although this argument might not sound novel at first, the ongoing mainstream academic debates about Turkish state's use of violence, including genocides and displacement in the 1930s, state of exception against the Kurdish civilians in the 1990s, transborder colonization in the region of Rojava, transborder military violence

into Rojava and Başur, as well as discussions of the PKK, often take place without a reference to the basic concept of colony.

While a majority of mainstream scholars do not engage with the concept of colonialism (Kirişci and Winrow 1997; Barkey and Fuller 1998; Bilgin and Sarihan 2013), others who have proposed the concept academically in the last decade, do not necessarily deliberate on the responsibilities of the intellectuals for the material de-colonizing of Kurdistan and anti-colonial knowledge production about the region (Yarkin 2019; Duruiz 2020; Matin 2020). Hence my second argument is that there is an intimate connection between colonial material reality and colonial knowledge production, and the researchers who use the concept of “colony,” need to tackle the question of ethical and political obligations of using this concept.

This paper aims to propose a clear definition of a relationship of coloniality with a focus on colonial violence in the region of Bakur and explain why such terminology is necessary, intellectually and politically. As I explain the limits of the terminology used in academic knowledge production about state violence and Kurdish resistance, I also discuss contemporary alternatives and the responsibility of de-colonizing for the organic intellectuals.

I believe a rightful decolonization of knowledge about Kurdistan and freedom movements in the region can take place when we simultaneously recognize ongoing colonization, and acknowledge that it is ultimately the organized anti-colonial movements, which can determine definitions of self-determination, as well as the political means to gain and sustain it. While intellectuals can have a critical stance towards organized movements, they need to be aware of their roles in perpetuating the colonial reality and criminalization of the movements. Hence it argues that a rightful de-colonization of knowledge production about Kurdistan requires first the recognition of ongoing material colonization of the region, and second an organic engagement with movement theories and practices.



## **An Ongoing Colonialism in Kurdistan: The Case of Bakur as an Entry Point**

Historically, the majority of Kurdistan constituted a relatively-autonomous zone under the reign of the Ottoman Empire, with a smaller part under the control of the Safavid Empire and its successor states. Even during the Ottoman reign, Kurdistan experienced violence, which reached a peak in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Empire exterminated many Kurdish power-holding groups in its attempts to establish more centralized authority over previously autonomous peripheral zones. Despite these violent attempts at centralization and the ongoing “de-development” policies in the region (Yadirgi 2017), Kurdistan enjoyed some limited autonomy in economic, political, and cultural matters, which was going to change dramatically with the imperial division of the Middle East into colonized and sovereign nation-states (Matin 2020).

During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, England and France redesigned the Middle East, colonizing much of it, with exceptions of Turkey, which gained sovereignty through the Lausanne Treaty of 1923,<sup>3</sup> and Iran, which was able to resist British and Russian invasions (Quataert 2005; Fromkin 2009; Khater 2011; Olson 1992). Kurdistan was made an invisible “international colony” through denial of an official status and its management was left at the hands of the colonized or sovereign governments of the Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran (Beşikçi 2013a). Its invisible status left Kurdistan unprotected even by most bare laws that regulated the management of the colonies, however discriminatory and violent they may be. Ironically, the Leftist and progressive circles who aligned with anti-colonial movements elsewhere, continued this imperial silence over Kurdistan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The leaders of the Turkish state, who initially promised autonomy to Bakur in order to receive Kurdish support for the newly built state, intensified the colonization of the region following this treaty (McDowall 2013, 142).

<sup>4</sup> At times these progressive circles are even hostile to anti-colonial Kurdish movements. For example, notable segments of the so-called anti-imperialist Left in the United States, have been critical of the democratic confederalist governance in Rojava, finding it a threat to “Syrian sovereignty,” without recognizing Syria’s colonizing of Kurdistan. For a critique of this form of anti-imperialism, see for instance (Achcar 2021).

In this historical sense, colonization of Kurdistan can be explained as a denial of the right to self-determination to a previously autonomous group of people residing in historically acclaimed lands, followed by structural and systematic violence that goes unrecognized internationally due to the lack of an official status, in this case, even that of a “colony”. This denial of the right to self-determination, together with an ideological formation, which as, Edward Said explained, “included notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination” (Said 1994, 9), normalized political and economic colonial rule over Kurdistan and made colonial violence over Kurdish people further invisible, and even legitimate.

As Kurdistan lost its political autonomy, its economy got under further grips of the colonizing central states, most of which already determined their economic policies according to the interest of the imperial powers (Yadirgi 2017; Matin 2020). In the case of Bakur, for instance, a landowner class tied to the colonizer state reinvented feudal relationships, while simultaneously solidifying political state power in the region (Bruinessen 2008). The colonizer state forcefully built institutions of administration, education, and criminal justice system, which replaced local communal relationships that organized cultural and political matters.

Colonial violence is systematic, structural, and affects the colonized in fundamental ways; it is quantitatively and qualitatively different than state violence that is imposed on insider -or even otherwise oppressed- populations. To start, as Robert J. C. Young, building from Edward Said, says, “colonialism was... fundamentally an act of geographical violence, a geographical violence employed against indigenous populations and their land rights (Young 2016, 20; Said 1994, 1–15).” One of the earlier forms of colonial violence employed in Bakur has been the displacement of Kurdish people in mass scale from their lands. Starting with the early Turkish Republic, this form of violence gains systematicity against the Kurdish populations, reaching a peak during the genocidal violence against Dersim in the late 1930s when many regions of Dersim were declared



“uninhabitable” and tens of thousands of people were forcefully taken to “majority Turkish-Sunni” regions (Aygün 2009; Goner 2017), and then again in the 1990s, when the Turkish state displaced millions of Kurdish villagers. The strategic building of administrative and military signposts on the Kurdish lands, the checkpoints implemented during different episodes are ongoing forms of this geographical colonial violence, which cut people’s connections to their communities, mountains and pasture lands alike.

A second form of systematic colonial violence has been genocidal military violence used in mass scale and legitimized through laws of exception. The Inspector-General System following the Report for Reform in the East in following the Sheikh Said resistance of 1925 resulting in Zilan massacre of 1930, the special Law for Dersim in 1935 followed by a genocide, the Extraordinary Situation Law that governed Bakur from 1987 to 20021, are some major episodes, where regions of Bakur were declared “states of exceptions” and faced genocidal violence. While colonial laws in general are based on the denial of self-determination, even these laws were withheld throughout the history of Turkey-Bakur relationship, and the colonized is turned into “bare life,” who can be dehumanized and killed in mass as “exceptions” to the law (Agamben 2021). As Yarkin explains, even Turkish state administrators either embracingly or critically referred to these exceptions to law as signs of colonial rule in Kurdistan (Yarkin 2019).

The third form of colonial violence foundational to the governing of the colonized, is criminalization, incarceration, and dehumanization in prisons. While colonial prisons played a central role to the colonial power from the beginning, the emergence of anti-colonial movements, a threat to the colony system, further intensified criminalization of movement intellectuals and actors. Early struggles for autonomy were coined as rebellions against the state, resulting in mass punishment of those involved, as in the case of the participants of the Sheikh Said resistance, or the intellectuals and leading figures in Dersim who were against the installation of colonial rule symbolized in military signposts. The Kurdish Freedom movements

of the 1970s, especially the PKK revolutionaries, were also criminalized as threats to national security, and later as “terrorists”. As we will see in the following, such colonial criminalization gets adopted even among the progressive academics, who would look for innocence and purity among the colonized, and think of anti-colonial methods, such as self-defense and anti-colonial guerilla warfare as “too radical” to be defended.

While criminalization against dissident groups is not limited to the colonized, and prisons are central to state power in general, the punishment of the colonized has taken more systematic and extreme measures. For example, while the military junta of 1980 in Turkey used criminalization and torture against all Leftist revolutionaries, Diyarbakir Prisons in Bakur became the most infamous, not only for the de-humanizing torture used against the Kurdish prisoners, but the systematic punishment of the prisoners and their families for their Kurdish identity alone, such as the prohibition of speaking in Kurdish with families, or forcing the prisoners to recite Turkish ultranationalist anthems (Cansız 2014a; Demirel 2011). Most recently when the Turkish state has become increasingly authoritarian and oppressive against many forms of dissidence, Kurdish populations, especially movement actors, constitute a large portion of the political prisoner population. Even a legal political party, the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, have had 16,490 members detained, and 3,695 arrested by 2020 (Halkların24 Demokratik Partisi 2020). Among those still held captive are co-chairs of the party and co-mayors of Kurdish municipalities, who were replaced by state appointed governors, cutting off the only lifeline of local democratic governance and hence intensifying the grasp of colonial rule over the region.<sup>5</sup>

A final realm of colonial violence I explore here are the cultural and psychological violence. Colonizing states have denied crucial rights of identity and culture to the colonized. Of utmost importance has

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers increased in the recent years since the AKP government have done various waves of arrests, most recently during the 2023 elections.





been the denial of right to education in mother tongue. Even during a brief period of democratization in Turkey in the late 2000s, where changes were made to the Turkish Constitution to improve the conditions of so-called “minorities”, this right was insistently denied (Derince 2013). This denial of language goes with a broader repression and criminalization of culture and identity (Salih 2021).

Transmission of historical trauma between generations, as well as everyday experiences with various forms of colonial violence also constitutes psychological violence on the colonized. In addition to transgenerational and collective trauma, Frantz Fanon, in his infamous *Wretched of the Earth*, explains that there is much self-questioning, doubt, and self-worth in the psyche of the colonized (Fanon 2002). Although anti-colonial movements present alternative forms of community and identity that are healing to its members and sympathizers, everyday experiences of violence at the hands of colonizer military and police forces, memories of historical genocidal violence, together with an ongoing cultural and lingual de-valuation constitute important, although not exhaustive, forms of psychological colonial violence.

Needless to say, the colonized are not just victims of such forms of colonial violence. Even their bare survival to this day constitutes a form of resistance against a system of colonization that deemed them dispensable. Moreover, collective and organized Kurdish freedom movement of the last four decades have engaged with a broader sense of freedom unforeseen in many political debates, which I discuss in the last section here. Nevertheless, in order to understand the anti-colonial nature of such movements, as well as their emancipatory potential, it is crucial to recognize the foundational, structural, systematic, and continuous nature of this colonial violence. In the following, I analyze the limitations of mainstream narratives which avoid the concept of colonialism and prescribe a certain distance to the anti-colonial movements.

## **Academic Debates on Bakur: Mainstream Complicity and Liberal (False) Objectivity**

The consolidation of a Turkish nation-state in the late 1930s following two decades of colonial violence pushed the colonial reality of Bakur-Kurdistan, outside of much of the political vocabulary until the 1960s. Mainstream academic debates in Turkey on nationalism, state, and society, did not engage with state violence against Kurds, let alone calling this violence colonialism. State discourse on Kurdish resistance as “backward rebellions of insurgency,” or “tools of imperialist plans to divide the country” (Beşikçi 2013b; Yeğen 1999), turned into one of “terrorism” against the PKK following its guerilla warfare tactic implemented first in 1984. Mainstream state academics have reproduced discourse of “war on terror” to this day and have remained complicit to state violence in Kurdistan.<sup>6</sup>

With the emergence of the Leftist movements in the 1960s and 70s, this silence in academia was interrupted briefly. Others have provided detailed accounts of Leftist movements’ engagement with the question of colonialism in Turkey, which I will not go in detail here (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012; Joost Jongerden and Akkaya 2011; Yegen 2016). I will only provide a contextual summary to focus on the relationship between movement debates and academic knowledge production, which, I argue, should be organically connected.

In the 1960s leftist movements started to break the silence on the question on Kurdistan, though many, like the Workers’ Party of Turkey (TİP), avoided the concept of colonialism despite the ongoing engagements between the Leftist and anti-colonial movements in the region (Ünlü and Değer 2011, 18; Joost Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). During this time large segments of the Turkish Left also associated themselves with the founder of the Turkish Republic, Kemal Atatürk and overlooked the genocidal foundations

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<sup>6</sup> There are innumerable publications especially in the areas of international relations, conflict and terrorism studies adopting state perspective of terrorism unquestionably. See for example, (Bilgel and Karahasan 2017; Roth and Sever 2007; Özeren et al. 2014).



of a Turkish state, mainly the Armenian Genocide and the colonization of Kurds, along with the ongoing oppression of Alevi, non-Muslims and many other groups.

These parties either did not engage with the question of colonialism, or concluded that Kurdistan is not a colony due to the “semi-colonial” status of Turkey itself. Dev-Yol, for example, ruled out the colonial question and suggested that the “the struggle of the Kurds needed to take place in the context of a common (Turkish-Kurdish) struggle against capitalism (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012, 9).<sup>7</sup>

In the late 1970s, a Kurdish revolutionary group, under the name of Kurdistan Revolutionaries, which later took the name of Worker’s Party of Kurdistan, offered a simultaneous critique of “social-chauvinism” of the Turkish Left, and non-revolutionary nationalist patriotism of the other Kurdish organizations in Bakur. Against Dev-Yol’s thesis that Turkey, a semi-colony cannot be a colonizer, movement leaders studied examples, such as Eritrea and Portugal, where countries that are not advanced capitalists themselves, did colonize other nations (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012, 9).<sup>8</sup>

On the academic front, a bold Turkish scholar, Ismail Beşikçi, criticized the silence of the Turkish Left on Kurdistan. Beşikçi stated that the silence over Kurdistan is an “inexcusable error” for the (Turkish) Left (Beşikçi 2014, 12; Ünlü and Değer 2011, 21) and became an early organic intellectual ally to the Kurdish freedom movement. For example, in her memoir about her years in the infamous Diyarbakır Prisons, Sakine Cansız, a founder of the PKK, defends Beşikçi against the harsh critiques of the Turkish and Kurdish Left, applauds his scientific stance, and refers to him as “the purest and warmest heart of the peoples (Cansız 2014a, 2:475).”

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<sup>7</sup> There were exceptions like *Kurtuluş*, later renamed *Türkiye ve Kuzey-Kurdistan Kurtuluş Örgütü* (the Liberation Organization of Turkey and Northern Kurdistan) (Jongerden and Akkaya 2012, 9; Yegen 2016, 167).

<sup>8</sup> Though there has been various literature on how colonized states can colonize other regions, for example, India’s colonization of Kashmir, or Pakistan’s colonization of Balochistan, segments of the Left continue to be reluctant to focus on these silenced cases of colonization (Osuri 2017; Sökefeld 2005).

As Beşikçi further distanced himself from what he calls “official (state) ideology,” he was transformed from being an outcast into a criminal. The 1971 junta sentenced him to 13 years in prison and when he was released with the general amnesty in 1974, he was unable to get an academic position unlike the other Leftist academics who were welcome back at their previous institutions. In 1979 he was sentenced to an additional 17 years in prison, where he writes his groundbreaking book, “Kurdistan: An International Colony,” which got banned as soon as it was published (Beşikçi 2013a).

This work and his research on imperialist power struggles over Kurdistan, explained how the division of Kurdistan into four different parts was an imperialist project which gave colonial rights to the nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria over each divided part of Kurdistan (Beşikçi 2013a; 2013b). According to Beşikçi, since the division of Kurdistan was a multi-state imperialist project, the fact that the Turkish Left turned a blind eye to Kurdistan is not because of their anti-imperialist politics, but rather due to an internalization of colonial state ideology. Beşikçi paid a very high price for his work. Not only did he spend 2 decades in prison, he could never gain any academic posts, which constituted a warning to all researchers who desired academic positions and privileges in Turkey.

For example, in his book, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, Martin van Bruinessen, discusses the difficulty of choosing a field site to study Kurdistan, and mentions the imprisonment case of Beşikçi to call attention to the danger of studying Bakur as an anthropologist (Bruinessen 2008, 14). Despite these challenges, the recognition of the Anfal Genocide in Başur in the early 1990s—against Saddam Hussein, who was now the enemy-, as well as the war between the PKK and the Turkish state, brought Kurdistan back into the attention of academics and scholars in the field of social sciences started to write about the so-called “Kurdish question” (Kirişçi and Winrow 1997; Barkey and Fuller 1998).



Some of this initial research, avoided the notion of colonization completely, and in setting Kurdistan as a “question” or “problem,” they problematized the colonized, instead of the colonial state. At their best, these attempts recognized violations in the area of human rights, and hence invited the state to take certain steps towards “democratization”. However, they not only abandoned the concept of “colonization” completely, and disregarded movement debates of the 1970s, but treated the Kurdish movement, and even the broader Kurdistan, as part of the “problem”. I call this literature that treats Kurdistan as a “problem,” a nationalist liberal discourse. In this nationalist framework, state violence against “minorities” are seen as violations of law, or mistakes of particular governments, rather than inherent violence of a colonizer state. Its nationalist undertones leave no space for Kurdish resistance.

A growing interest in Kurdistan in the 2000s and the entrance of Kurdish scholars into the field, resulted in relatively more progressive research and terminology in the academia. Some of the opening came with a sound critique of the history nation-state formation, and of state violence and ideology (Yeğen 1999; Bozarslan 2001). This deeper critique has also opened space for a recognition of Kurdish resistance in different forms. Some academics pushed the boundaries to use the concept of colonialism to explain systematic state violence in Bakur.

Unfortunately, some concepts and frameworks, which initially seem to have pushed the boundaries of liberal academia, ultimately reproduce colonial imaginaries. The first such framework is that of “internal colony.” For example, in a recent article about the AKP government’s use of Islam as a tool of colonization, Mehmet Kurt, uses this concept to explain the case of Kurdistan (Kurt 2019). Although, unlike many of his peers, Kurt directly engages with Beşikçi’s concept of international colony and uses the notion of “colony” throughout the paper, he goes on to argue that Kurdistan is an “internal colony,” which, borrowing from Robert Blauner, he explains to take place “within state boundaries” (Kurt 2019, 353).

The concept of “internal colony” has recently gained traction in academic discourse. Murat Devres, for example, discusses Dersim, where Turkish state massacred tens of thousands of mostly Alevi Kurds, as “internal colonial rule (Devres 2019).” Yet another example is Mohammed Salih, who uses the concept of internal colonialism together with “internal cultural imperialism,” and explains that “the term internal here refers to the specificity of this type of ‘imperialistic’ relationship, as it occurs exclusively among different regions or groups within the domestic sphere of a nation state (Salih 2021, 746).”

These concepts of internal colonialism or internal cultural imperialism, perhaps potentially useful to explain the systematic nature of economic, political, and cultural oppression of racialized groups in other concepts, normalizes the borders of the colonizing nation-state in the case of Kurdistan. By recognizing Kurdistan, a geographically distinct entity, “internal” to the colonial borders of the Turkish nation-state, and calling this entity “Turkish Kurdistan” (Kurt 2019, 352), Kurt, for example, unintendedly reproduces the colonial spatial imaginary of a colonizer state. Similarly, Salih explains a relationship of colonialism, “within the domestic sphere of a nation state,” which he takes for granted (Salih 2021, 746).

As Duruiz, citing from, Beşikçi, shows, the specific territorial character of Kurdistan, the fact that the borders of the colonizer state is drawn to include the adjacent territories of Kurdistan in each case, increases the capacity of the colonial state’s capacity to implement and maintain domination unlike adjacent colonies territorially distant from the colonial state (Duruiz 2020). Hence Kurdistan’s territorial proximity to the respective colonial states should not normalize colonial spatial imaginary in which the colonized is “included” within the colonizer state’s boundaries.

In addition to this taming of the notion of colonialism with identifiers like “internal,” a second significant way a colonial imaginary is reproduced is through a false objectivity in knowledge production perceived as separating oneself from all involved parties



equally, in this case, from state, as well as anti-colonial movements. While the earlier era of anti-colonial and anti-racist movements produced organic relationships between academic and movement intellectuals, this framework of false objectivity treats movements and movement intellectuals as research objects only and avoids direct engagement with movement theories. If state ideology, internalized nationalism, and fear, produced the initial distance from the movements, this liberal discourse of “objectivity,” which remains dominant in mainstream Kurdish Studies, created a false category of “two sides,” equating the colonial state violence to that of the anti-colonial movements.

This false objectivity is most explicit in a revived literature on the so-called “Kurdish question” from liberal frameworks of human rights. For example, in his introduction to a newly edited series titled “Understanding Turkey’s Kurdish Question,” editor, Fevzi Bilgin says, “The (Kurdish) issue is not only about addressing the political demands of the Kurdish people, but also about ending violence and terrorism issuing from it.” Followed by a description of the losses since the formation of the PKK, Bilgin goes on to explain the “Kurdish question” to be an “intractable problem, that persistently reproduces itself despite efforts to change from *both sides*<sup>9</sup> (Bilgin and Sarihan 2013, viii).” This framework of “both sides,” and a vague reference to violence and losses without the naming of colonial problem is widespread and dominant in the literature (Gurses 2018; Saatci 2002; Bilgel and Karahasan 2017; Yildiz and Breau 2010; Somer 2004; Yildiz 2012).

In an opinion piece by New York Times, Cihan Tuğal, for example, calls the war between the PKK and Turkey, a “conflict,” and condones the PKK for having “contributed to the bloodshed” and “killing civilians as well as security officials (Tuğal 2022).” Although Tuğal recognizes the conditions that led to the emergence of the PKK and the fact that Turkey’s militaristic approach has not left room for “more conciliatory Kurdish organizations,” he fails to

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<sup>9</sup> Emphasis is mine.

recognize the Kurds' right to anti-colonial struggle against the colonizing Turkish state, which took the form of guerrilla warfare, as happened in much of the colonized world in the 1960s and 70s. Referring to the colonial Turkish state and the PKK with the same discourse of "bloodshed," or violence, this false liberal objectivity, assumes a safe distance from "both sides".

This liberal discourse of "anti-violence," presumably "objective" to "both sides," attempts to engage Turkish state violence and the PKK on the same level. As Walter Rodney, a prominent Guyanese historian and political activist, asked with reference to anti-colonial struggles of the 1970s, by what standards of morality can the violence used by a slave to break his chains be considered the same as the violence of a slave master?"(Rodney 1990, 22). "By what standards of morality" can anti-colonial resistance be considered on the same grounds as the violence of a colonizing state that has displaced, massacred, criminalized, tortured the colonized for over a century?

Without a direct engagement with systematic and structural colonial violence and anti-colonial movements on their own terms, these moral critiques blame the PKK for using "violence," without engaging with movement literature on self-determination and self-defense. In this statist imaginary, states' monopoly of violence and their colonial rule over colonized populations are beyond critique and reproach. Because self-defense against the second largest army of NATO, cannot be part of liberal imaginary of politics, this supposedly "objective" discourse of "both sides" ultimately delegitimizes not only the PKK, but the political will of millions of Kurds who see the PKK as an anti-colonial front of self-defense and determination against the colonial Turkish state.

In these discourses there is also a yearning for "conciliatory" organizations to negotiate with the state, to solve the so-called Kurdish "question" or "problem". Tekdemir, for example, separates the Kurdish parliamentary politics represented by the People's Democracy Party (HDP), and, what he calls "the armed politics of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) (Tekdemir 2016). This yearning





and separation are based on two related conditions: a selective recognition of state violence around the discourse of human rights without an understanding of the historical and foundational violence of colonialism; and a disregard towards anti-colonial self-defense.

One episode of state violence acknowledged widely among Turkish academics is the 1980 coup d'état, where political and civil society organizations were closed down and many of their participants faced imprisonment and torture. Tuğal, for instance, contextualizes the emergence of the PKK in this period. Although this critique of state violence is a welcome step, it fails to recognize the historicity, continuity, and foundational nature of colonial state violence (Tuğal 2022).

In this imaginary, neither the violence of colonial rule itself, nor the historical and contemporary practices of self-defense and self-determination, are recognized for what they are. From the suppression of the Koçgiri resistance in 1921 to the genocidal violence against Dersim in 1938, from the “special” treatment of the Kurdish regions following the 1980 coup d'état to the state of exception of the 1990s, Turkish colonial rule has been foundational, ongoing, and systematic. It has taken many forms, from annihilation, to displacement, to criminalization, to assimilation. Anti-colonial struggles and forms of self-defense and self-determination have a long history as well, with an abundance of means and tactics debated among public intellectuals and movements. This yearning for “conciliatory” organizations, while colonial state violence is in place not only re-criminalizes anti-colonial politics, but also sets itself in a colonial position to determine “what is good for the colonized.”

This liberal framework based on false objectivity also pushes the academic researcher to focus on movement mistakes, or patterns of power in the movement, without a due consideration of colonial violence of death and criminalization under which movements struggle to survive. From within the liberal academic frameworks, even those who do not outright reject the PKK are set for a false

academic objectivity, looking endlessly for the “mistakes” or “shortcomings,” of the movement to remain of equal distance.

Isabel Kaser’s recent book on the Kurdish Women’s Movement is a case in point. From the start, Kaser separates her work from, what she calls “party’s own propaganda and the activist literature,” and quite superficially criticizes her activist narrators as reiterators of party “propaganda” or “ideology” (Käser 2021). As Joost Jongerden rightly points, Kaser’s take on ideology as “false representation” or “branding,” is simplistic, while her alternative of ideology as discourse fails to account for women’s “self-definition” and how they make sense of these definitions in their daily lives (Jongerden 2022, 577). Kaser’s superficial treatment of movement narrators’ perspectives as “propaganda” throughout the book, reproduces, what Jongerden, building from sociologist Howard Becker, calls the “hierarchy of credibility” (Jongerden 2016b, 96). In this case, the hierarchy in question is that of colonial knowledge production, which treats movements and movement actors as “objects” of research only.

Importantly here, Kaser’s disengagement with the movement is so normalized within liberal academia that the crucial methodological failures in her book, even from within mainstream paradigms of knowledge production, went unrecognized during and after her research. To start, her field research is composed of months of limited engagement only where she had various language and access problems. In her discussion of Bakur part of her field, Kaser writes, “my mobility became increasingly constrained by the deteriorating security situation. This meant that I could only very occasionally visit KJA or do interviews with its members from mid-December onwards (Käser 2021, 30)”.

Instead of recognizing the inability of access, or choosing to learn the language to understand her interlocutors, Kaser goes ahead not only to make conclusions about interlocutors she did not have access to, but to discuss movement theories written in Turkish without the basic skill to read such theories. Specifically, Kaser arrives at



conclusions about *jineoloji*, women-centered science approach of the Kurdish Women's Movement without reading a single text from tens of volumes of the *Jineoloji Journal* and various other publications and broadcasts on the topic by the movement (Käser 2021; Al-Ali and Käser 2022).<sup>10</sup>

Disengagement with movement literature turns into a methodological failure in these cases, which goes unrecognized by university publishers and peer review journals alike, which take disengagement and (false) objectivity as a norm. Imagine writing about post-structuralism without reading a single text by Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, and like and getting your work published by prestigious academic publishers. These ongoing patterns of colonial knowledge production damage the movement's efforts of international solidarity, necessary for the elimination of colonial violence. It is therefore, most ironic for scholars who organize workshops on de-colonization, to ignore such crucial debates among movement publications and discussions.

This is not to say that we cannot criticize the PKK or the mistakes it has made over the years, like any other political organization. And of course, the gains of a movement, such as the anti-patriarchal theories and practices of the Kurdish women's movement, are historically contextualized, neither perfect nor finalized. However, academics should realize that, while the liberal imaginary, left untouched by colonial violence for decades, seeks for "conciliation" or "purity," on the part of the colonized movements, the colonizing state continues to kill and imprison, as explained clearly by Dilar Dirik (Dirik 2021). Hence staying of "equal distance" is false and complicit, while failing to "listen (Patai 1991)" to movement actors in their own terms and calling one's interlocutors' interpretations as "propaganda" is re-colonizing knowledge production.

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<sup>10</sup> For *Jineoloji Committee's* response to the article co-authored by Nadje Al-Ali and Isabel Käser, see <https://jineoloji.org/en/2021/05/10/open-letter-to-the-public/>.

Moreover, researchers who cherish academic objectivity otherwise, criticize movements for not accomplishing their promised revolutionary goals, for instance, that of gender emancipation instantaneously. An objective analysis would require an assessment of social transformations in the area of gender emancipation historically and contextually. Hence it is ironic that when it comes to the evaluating movement success, academics abruptly, take the position of an activist criticizing a movement for not having achieved revolutionary promises, instead analyzing how movements have transformed Kurdish societies' gender norms and practices historically and sociologically, and what yet remains to be transformed.

Academics who are sincere about de-colonizing Kurdish Studies need to think about patterns of “false objectivity” which imposes distancing the researcher from movement actors, theories, and intellectuals and equates violence of the colonizer state to that of the anti-colonial movement. A true de-colonizing of knowledge production requires recognition of ongoing colonization, as well as an engagement with movements that aim to de-colonize Kurdistan materially and mentally. In the last decade there emerged two visibly alternative and competing threads to this liberal imaginary, which rightfully recognize Kurdistan as a colony. I will conclude the paper with a discussion of these alternatives in the hopes of offering some reflections towards an anti-colonial knowledge production in Kurdish Studies.

### **Contemporary Anti-Colonial Frameworks in Academic Kurdish Studies**

The first alternative to liberal frameworks is presented by a revival of Beşikçi's work. The formation of the Ismail Beşikçi Foundation in Istanbul in 2011 and the increasing number of scholars who engage with Beşikçi illustrate this revival (Ünlü and Değer 2011; Yarkın 2019; Duruiz 2020), which coincides with a transformation of the political ideology of Abdullah Öcalan. Following his abduction and imprisonment in 1999, Öcalan's writings shifted increasingly from



self-determination in the form of a nation-state to a model of democratic confederalism that empowers society in its plurality, and especially women, at the expense of the state (Ocalan 2020; Akkaya and Jongerden 2012; Burç 2020; Jongerden 2016a; Güneşer 2021; Dirik 2022; Sunca 2023b).

Öcalan has written extensively on the inherently oppressive nature of the nation-state and its homogenizing and disempowering characteristics, and has denounced this form of governance as a pillar of capitalist modernity (Ocalan 2010; 2012; 2020). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain Öcalan's critique of the state and the alternative model of democratic confederalism, based on radical participatory democracy, women's empowerment, and social ecology, which others have done successfully (Güneşer 2021; Dirik 2022; Jongerden 2016a; Akkaya and Jongerden 2012). I will rather focus on the implications of this transformation on debates about de-colonizing Kurdistan and Kurdish Studies.

In a recent article about genealogy of Kurdistan as a colony, Deniz Duruiz discusses Beşikçi and PKK having similar stances on the colonial reality of Kurdistan without distinguishing their different takes on alternative routes to de-colonization (Duruiz 2020). Once we embrace the rightful category of colony to refer to Kurdistan, we are then faced with the ethical political question of how to de-colonize the region materially and whether and how academics can take part in de-colonizing of the region, as well as the de-colonizing of the knowledge production about the region. Towards this end, intellectuals need to engage with the alternatives of de-colonization and self-determination on the ground.

Beşikçi and nationalist Kurdish segments have been highly critical of Öcalan and the Kurdish Freedom Movement and argue that the path to de-colonization is self-determination in the form of a Kurdish

nation-state.<sup>11</sup> For example, adopting the concept of colonialism informed by Beşikçi, Güllistan Yarkın, criticizes the Kurdish Freedom Movement for adopting the concept of democratic confederalism, without any engagement with theoretical literature on and practical implications of the concept (Yarkın 2019). There is an ironic imposition of a particular objective, self-determination in the form of a nation-state, onto an anti-colonial movement here without a due engagement with movement concepts on self-determination. Ibrahim Kaypakkaya, one of the earliest Turkish revolutionaries recognizing colonialism in Kurdistan, warns against such stances in the early 1970s. He says:

“We defend the Kurdish nation’s right to self-determination, that is their right to found a separate state. Yet whether or not they want to use this right or in which direction they will use this right belongs to the Kurdish nation itself (Kaypakkaya 2004, 281).”

The question of representation is of course debatable given there are different interpretations of self-determination among the “Kurdish nation.” One can argue that for as long as there is a multitude of interpretations in the broader Kurdish political arena, intellectuals engaged with concepts of colonialism and self-determination can also have different opinions. Although this may be true, intellectuals are not in a position to build new social movements that best fits their theoretical determinations. Hence if they are sincerely interested in de-colonizing of Kurdistan and of knowledge production about Kurdistan, they need to focus on what alternative paths exist on the ground, and which of these alternatives best align with their perceptions of de-colonization. In other words, since intellectual debates alone cannot de-colonize the material reality, a position of disengagement from all movements and existing political alternatives

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<sup>11</sup> Some scholars went as far as blaming Öcalan for “abandoning the cause” (Özcan 2006). It is important to recognize that the PKK was never a nationalist movement in the classical sense, and the nation-state was only one of their many political objectives. As Jongerden and Akkaya argue, the PKK was “born from the left,” with a historical lineage, not in Kurdish nationalism, but in Marxist-Leninism (Joost Jongerden and Akkaya 2011). In their biographies and my various interviews, PKK founders and sympathizers have been highly critical of various Kurdish nationalist movements (Cansız 2014b; 2014a).



only reproduces relations of coloniality. An intellectual interested in de-colonization needs to engage with alternative theories and practices of self-determination on the ground and decide which to stand in solidarity with towards de-colonization despite the potential critiques they may have of these alternatives.

Yasin Sunca is one such academic who has taken this task seriously and has analyzed two alternatives of self-determination already in practice in broader Kurdistan: Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Bashur and the Autonomous administration of North and East Syria in Rojava (Sunca 2023a; 2023b). While the former is based on the nation-state model, although in a limited form, the latter has adopted democratic confederalism built upon direct participation of different segments of society and women. For the purposes of this paper, the latter alternative of self-determination includes not only Rojava, but places, networks, and organizations that consider Öcalan as their “rewber (guide),” and have adopted democratic confederalism in place of the nation-state, which I will refer to as the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

Drawing on various literatures on colonialism, coloniality, nation-state, decolonization, theoretically and in practice, Sunca illustrates that despite its relative autonomy from the colonial Iraq, KRG has not been able to de-colonize Kurdish societies in Bashur, and have not improved the lives of Kurdish people in other ways (Sunca 2023b). This is not only because of the limitations of self-determination exposed externally, but because of the organization of power in the form of an oppressive state mechanism, and limited internal considerations and aspirations towards freedom. The failures of the KRG resemble other post-colonial nation states, even those who have gained sovereignty from the colonial states in more expanded and recognized forms. From their (re)production and colonization of other oppressed groups, to their inability to de-construct colonial structures and mentalities, the problems with the post-colonial nation states are well-established (Sökefeld 2005; Osuri 2017; Mamdani 2022; Sunca 2023a).

It is based on these failures that The Kurdish Freedom movement has developed a critique of the nation-state model, as well as theories and practices of a “free society,” outside of the bounds of capitalist modernity. Havin Güneşer explains this transformation in the following:

“The question for freedom started on the basis of something very physical and identifiable, the oppression, colonization, and annihilation of Kurdish people, and moved on from there to the point where it became a quest for freedom in general and a questioning of the very meaning of life (Güneşer 2021, 1).”

The Kurdish freedom movement in this sense presents a viable alternative towards de-colonization in Kurdistan. A central aspect of their quest for freedom has been women’s emancipation, which Öcalan, inspired by feminist scholar Maria Mies, perceived as a crucial pillar of de-colonization (Mies 1988; Ocalan 2020). Öcalan writes that women are the “first colony” and hence their struggle against patriarchy is a de-colonial struggle central for the building a free society (Ocalan 2020). Due to this emphasis on a women’s revolution, scholar activists of the Kurdish Freedom Movement have engaged with women’s and especially indigenous women’s theories and practices, one may say, sometimes at the expense of the direct concept of colonialism and anti-colonial self-determination.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the Kurdish Freedom Movement has not given up on self-determination, but on a particular form of self-determination in the form of a (nation)state (Jongerden 2016a; Sunca 2023b). A clear and forward claiming of anti-colonial politics, taken outside of a methodological and political nationalism, which prescribes an a-priori nation-state form to self-determination, is necessary for our purposes here. As we continue to analyze colonial violence with its rightful name, we can simultaneously discuss theories and practices of self-determination beyond the nation-state model. While a direct engagement with movement theories is critical to de-colonizing the

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, (Dirik 2022), as well as Kurdish Women’s Movement’s lecture series titled “Women Weaving the Future” <https://www.youtube.com/@WomenWeavingFuture>.





field of Kurdish Studies, an emphasis on ongoing colonial violence, as well as the claim to self-determination in Kurdistan, needs to take more direct prevalence.

The Kurdish freedom movement have developed two pillars for a radical democratic understanding of self-determination. The first, well-researched pillar, is democratic confederalism, a participatory and pluralist model of democracy that grants right to self-govern to all communities, and is based not only on equal representation but active participation of women and other historically marginalized groups (Öcalan 2014; Jongerden 2016a; Dirik 2022; Sunca 2023b). To Öcalan, in contradiction to the state form, which is necessarily based on centralism, this form of self-determination strengthens local organizing for all, and hence strengthens society. He says:

“The state continuously orientates itself towards centralism in order to pursue the interests of the power monopolies. Just the opposite is true for confederalism. Not the monopolies but the society is at the center of political focus. The heterogeneous structure of the society is in contradiction to all forms of centralism (Öcalan 2014, 23).”

In an anti-colonial framework, democratic confederalism, not only de-colonizes the particular colonized group, in this case the Kurdish society, but it de-colonizes society in general and prevents against colonization of the marginalized by the newly de-colonized group. The second pillar of self-determination in Öcalan’s thought, whose relationship to self-determination is less-explored in the literature, is the right to self-defend, which, like governance, is shared democratically and can be claimed by all groups. To start, self-defense exercised in a democratic confederalist model prevents a state structure from monopolizing means of defense (Üstündağ 2016; Dirik 2022).

Moreover, the idea of self-defense here is understood more broadly than anti-colonial violence against a colonizer state and society. Although like Fanon, this approach recognizes means of violence as a necessary strategic revolutionary tool to win against the foundational and systematic violence of the colonizer, the idea of

self-defense in Kurdish freedom movement is not only against the colonizing state, but against segments of colonized society that resists democratization. For example, women's self-defense, which takes a center stage in theory and practice, is explained to be not only against patriarchal colonizer state, but also against all other forms of oppression, and it is an ongoing effort, which requires and "autonomous, self-reliant" and "organized" institutions to operate along with education and consciousness (Dirik 2022, 123–24).

A notion of self-determination as a broadly defined notion of freedom separates the concept of self-defense in Kurdish freedom movement from Fanon's notion of anti-colonial violence. Fanon explains that it is only through violence that the consciousness and the psyche of the colonized can heal from the dehumanizing mark of colonization. In other words, violence is necessary, not only for de-colonization of lands and nations, but that of the minds and souls of the colonized (Fanon 2002). The Kurdish freedom movement replaces anti-colonial violence in Fanon's thought with the right to self-defend and the collective experience in an anti-colonial democratic model of self-governance. While the colonized is entitled to the right to self-defend, and can legitimately use the tools of self-defense against the colonizer, the ultimate healing lies in creating alternative spaces and experiences of collective self-realization with the built-in organizational ability to defend such alternatives. Self-determination is built upon self-defense, which may or may not be materialized in the form of anti-colonial violence.

As Sunca explains, Kurdish Freedom Movements' alternative practices of anti-colonial politics is not without problems. One major issue Sunca identifies is that of an unproblematized universal category of "humanity" in political discourses of Rojava, which potentially perpetuates a Western colonial imaginary through an inconspicuous association of an abstract humanity with the West (Sunca 2023a). However, as intellectuals, we can only work with the alternatives on the ground and take part in conversations that can contribute to de-colonizing of material reality, knowledge production, mentalities and personalities, which, after all is a



perpetual practice and endeavor. Given the lack and unattainability of politically pure models on the ground, as well as the ongoing colonial violence, we need to, in Dilar Dirik's words, "think generously about freedom struggles- still critically, but with political awareness (Dirik 2022, 15)."

The de-colonization seminar series organized by the University of Rojava during Summer 2022 was a very good example of an engaged conversation, where movement intellectuals discuss theories, methodologies, and practices of de-colonization historically and contextually in connection with other indigenous movements and organic academics.<sup>13</sup> We cannot shy away from this engagement in the name of a false liberal objectivity or due to the multitude of potential alternatives if our ultimate objective is a simultaneous de-colonization of Kurdistan and Kurdish Studies.

### **De-Colonization of Knowledge Production Needs Solidarity with the Anti-Colonial Movements**

In this paper I engaged with debates of colonialism and anti-colonial resistance in Kurdish Studies, in the hopes of opening conversations towards a substantial de-colonization of the field along with a rightful de-colonization of Kurdistan. Without a due discussion of the historical process of colonization and ongoing occupation of Kurdistan, the question of de-colonizing the field of Kurdish studies has become a catchy buzzword that deprives the intellectual of their moral and political responsibilities. While specific forms of oppression and human rights violations are readily critiqued, the fact that these specific forms are embedded in an ongoing structural and systematic colonial reality is not recognized. And different from earlier eras of de-colonization, where intellectuals were engaged with the movements, most academics set themselves apart from the anti-colonial movements under a false pretense of liberal objectivity.

I argue that once the colonial problem is rightfully acknowledged, the next step for intellectuals sincerely interested in de-colonization

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQL56mpDPKE&t=391s>

is to engage with different alternatives of anti-colonial movements and their theories of self-determination on the ground. Since academics and non-movement researchers and intellectuals are not in a position to build new mass movements, they can only show or deny solidarity with the existing political alternatives. The Kurdish Freedom Movement proposes alternative theories and practices of self-determination, that of democratic confederalism and self-defense, where women's self-emancipation as a de-colonial practice is at the center. I believe that the movement's broader sense of freedom is promising for a material de-colonization of Kurdistan and the field of Kurdish Studies and argue that those involved in knowledge production about Kurdistan at least have the duty to engage with the concepts and practices of this movement in depth and beyond the bounds of false academic objectivity.

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